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Labour Party
(Great Britain)

Bread and butter politics

[London]

[1938?]

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"Bread and Butter" Politics: The Labour Party in Parliament

A VISITOR sitting in the Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons on a day when matters of real concern to the workers were being discussed would be struck by the fact that Labour M.P.s were speaking to almost empty Government benches. That has been a far too common sight since the "National" Government has been in power.

The Labour Party has to plead its case in the knowledge that when the division bell rings hundreds of Government supporters, who have not taken the trouble to listen to the debate, will troop into the Lobby to vote against the Labour proposals.

In a Parliament of 615 members, the Government's supporters number 424, and the Opposition numbers 191, of whom 160 are Labour M.P.s. So the Government always has a potential majority of at least 233. Actually, because of the apathy of many of its own supporters, the Government's majority is frequently well below 100, and has even been as low as one vote.

The fact remains, however, that the Labour Party has to fight against tremendous odds, and it would be understandable if at times a feeling of hopelessness pervaded the Labour benches. But far from being in that frame of mind, the Labour Party conducts every struggle in the House of Commons vigorously and with the determination to put the best possible case before the House. Even after the panic General Election of 1931, when the Parliamentary Labour Party numbered only 60, the Party put up such a gallant fight that its opponents were compelled to pay tribute to its work.

Tory Tributes to Labour M.P.s.

Perhaps the most striking tribute to the Parliamentary Labour Party was that paid by Mr. Baldwin in the House of Commons on May 22, 1935:

"The Labour Party as a whole has helped to keep the flag of Parliamentary Government flying in the world through the difficult periods through which we

have passed . . . I want to say that, partly because I think it is due, and partly because I know that they, as I, stand in their heart of hearts for our Constitution and for our free Parliament . . .”

On the following day *The Times* described this statement as a “moving and well-deserved tribute to the Labour Opposition for their persistence, in spite of their exiguous numbers, in preserving the traditions of a free Parliament.”

Mr. Winston Churchill has also paid a well-deserved tribute to the Parliamentary Labour Party. Speaking at Epping on November 8, 1934, he said :

“I must say that the Socialist Party does extremely well, considering its numbers, but the debates are listened to by only a fraction of the M.P.s.”

That is the background of the Labour Party's work in Parliament. Now let us see how Labour conducts its day-by-day struggle.

* * *

THE PARLIAMENTARY LABOUR PARTY AT WORK

IT is not possible in a short pamphlet to give a detailed account of what the Parliamentary Labour Party has done in the present Parliament. What follows is an attempt to show Labour at work in a typical period of Parliamentary time. For this purpose we will take the period from the beginning of the new Session on October 26, 1937, to December 23, when Parliament adjourned for the Christmas recess.

The King's Speech which opened the new Session gave an outline of the Government's proposed legislation. It foreshadowed measures for dealing with air raid precautions, “unification” of coal royalties and the reorganisation of the coal industry, distribution of electricity, milk supply, the sea fish industry, the finance of slum clearance, agricultural housing, British films, bogus clubs, share-pushing, and wages and conditions in the transport of goods by road.

There was no reference in the Speech to the League of Nations ; nor were there any references to the unemployed or the Distressed Areas.

The attitude of the Labour Party towards the Government's complacency in home affairs and incompetency in foreign affairs was summed up in the Labour amendment to the Address :

“But regret that Your Majesty's advisers, by their weak and vacillating policy in foreign affairs, which has gravely imperilled the prospects of lasting peace and

national security, betrayed the principles of the League of Nations and seriously diminished British influence, and by their lack of any constructive and fundamental proposals for raising the standard of life of the people and for establishing economic prosperity upon a just and enduring basis, have forfeited the confidence of this House.”

That amendment was moved in order to show the country the vital difference between the Government's policy and that of the Labour Party.

It was a formal declaration of Labour's demand that Britain should give a lead for peace and real security based on an international collective system ; and that in home affairs the duty of a Government should be to ensure real prosperity for all the people.

Two days were given to the debate, and the case for Socialism and Peace was effectively put from the Labour benches, after which the amendment was defeated by a majority of 221.

Demand for Reduced Working Hours.

One of the first subjects raised by the Labour Party when the House got down to the ordinary business was that of a reduction in hours of labour. On November 3 the following motion was moved :

“That this House, recognising the claim of the worker to benefit from the increased productivity of modern industry and realising the urgent necessity for absorbing many of the present unemployed, calls for immediate measures for securing a substantial reduction in working hours.”

During the debate Labour M.P.s pointed out that a great number of workers have not even secured a 48-hour week ; that the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops has reported cases of 50 to 60 hours a week being worked ; that the “National” Government, by its opposition to international Conventions for the 40-hour week, has put Great Britain in the company of Japan and other reactionary countries.

A Tory amendment was moved expressing the view that the matter was primarily for settlement by negotiation between employers' and workers' organisations in each industry.

The obvious reply to this was given by Labour speakers : that there are, unfortunately millions of workers who are not in Trade Unions, and it is among these that the longest hours are worked.

The Government spokesman expressed "sympathy" with the principle of shorter hours, but opposed the Labour motion, which was defeated by the narrow margin of 16 votes.

Annual Holidays With Pay.

On November 12 the Labour Party moved the second reading of its Annual Holidays Bill. A similar Labour Bill was given a second reading a year previously, in spite of the Government's opposition, but was afterwards killed during the committee stage by the passing of a Tory amendment depriving the Bill of its obligatory character.

The Bill moved on November 12 provided for a fortnight's holiday in each year, with full pay, for every worker, and included payment for the present customary holidays.

Speakers for the Bill showed that Great Britain is lagging behind most other countries where paid holidays are legally enforced. Referring to the fact that Labour pressure, backed by a strong public opinion in the country, had compelled the Government to set up an Inquiry into the question, they urged the House to reaffirm its previous decision in favour of the principle.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour opposed the second reading and supported the Tory amendment welcoming the development of the practice of granting holidays with pay by voluntary agreement, but opposing the Bill on the ground that the House should await the report of the Inquiry Committee.

It was, however, made clear in the speeches from the Government side that the real objection was to making holidays with pay compulsory.

The Bill was defeated by only one vote, a large number of the Government's supporters refraining from voting. It remains to be seen what attitude the Government will adopt in the event of the Inquiry Committee reporting in favour of this long-overdue reform.

Workmen's Compensation.

Another matter on which the Labour Party has made a big fight is workmen's compensation. There are many injustices and anomalies in the present Acts, and on November 19 the second reading of a Labour Bill was moved which contained provisions for remedying these injustices and securing adequate compensation for the victims of industrial accidents. Eighteen months previously a similar Labour Bill was opposed and defeated by the Government on the alleged ground that it was "too complicated." The Bill debated on November 19 was therefore simplified and dealt with a number of points which it is worth while to summarise.

Under the present law the total payment to a widow with dependent children cannot exceed £600. In 1920 the Holman Gregory Commission recommended a maximum of £800. The Bill proposed to abolish lump-sum payments and substitute weekly payments to a widow of 30s. or one-half the weekly earnings of the deceased workman, whichever was the greater, and 10s. for each child up to the age of 16.

For total incapacity the present sum payable is 50 per cent. of the pre-accident earnings. The Bill proposed 75 per cent. with a minimum of £3 a week unless the normal earnings prior to the accident were less than that sum. For partial incapacity the Bill proposed that instead of 50 per cent. of the difference between the pre-accident and post-accident wages, the injured worker should receive the whole of the difference.

The present test for determining the weekly earnings is the average weekly earnings during the 12 months prior to the accident. This often works unfairly against injured persons owing to short-time or intermittent employment. The Bill proposed to make the basis the normal earnings of the worker at his regular trade.

The present law provides that, in case of dispute, the matter is submitted to a medical referee. The Bill proposed a Medical Board of three doctors. In order to prevent the hardship resulting from employers not being in a position to meet their liabilities under the Acts, the Bill proposed compulsory insurance for every employer.

Now these proposals are very modest. They are minimum needs to ensure justice for the disabled soldiers of industry and for the dependents of those who are killed at their work.

The estimated cost of the reforms is not more than £8,000,000 a year, or about 10s. a year for each employer. But they were opposed by the Government, and the second reading of the Bill was defeated by 64 votes.

Hunger Amidst Plenty.

The Labour Party has repeatedly drawn attention to the tragic paradox of poverty and hunger amidst plenty. A typical debate on this subject was that which took place on November 24 on a Labour motion expressing concern at the evidence of widespread malnutrition, intensified by rising prices, and regretting the Government's failure to take effective steps to deal with this urgent problem.

An overwhelming mass of evidence was produced by Labour speakers in proof of the existence of malnutrition amongst masses of the poorly-paid workers, the unemployed, and pensioners. Sir John Orr and other authorities were quoted, together with the fact, disclosed by official figures, that during the past three years 60 per cent. of the

young men presenting themselves for enlistment in the fighting services were rejected as unfit.

The Government's reply was a flat denial of the urgency of the problem. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health declared that everybody would obtain "the minimum necessary for subsistence." He eulogised the social services, and was promptly reminded by Labour M.P.s that both the Trade Union Movement and the social services, which have been responsible for such improvement as has been effected in the people's standard of living, were strongly opposed by Tories in the initial stages.

The motion was defeated by 62 votes.

Increased Cost of Living.

On December 22, the day before the House adjourned for the Christmas recess, an attack on the Government's food restriction policy, which has sent food prices sky-high, was made on a Labour motion which drew attention to the upward trend of prices without a corresponding increase in the income of the average householder, and expressed the opinion that the public, especially that section already suffering on account of inadequate resources, should be protected by measures for the better organisation of production and distribution and the elimination of profiteering.

The Government spokesman did not deny that food prices have risen, but he declared that it was not really a serious matter. The motion was defeated by the votes of well-to-do Government supporters who seem utterly incapable of realising what an increase in the cost of living means to the working-class housewife.

Conditions in Distributive Trades.

On the same day a Labour motion was moved viewing with concern the long hours, low wages and bad conditions of employment prevailing in the distributive trades. While welcoming the efforts made by the best employers and the Trade Unions, through collective agreements, to establish better conditions, the motion urged that further measures, including a more strict and uniform administration of the Shops Acts, are necessary to raise the social conditions of this very large section of the working community.

In the debate Labour M.P.s pointed out that there are at least 3,000,000 workers employed in the distributive trades; that many young people from 14 to 20 years of age are working 50, 60 and 70 hours a week, excluding meal times, for miserably low wages; that many adults are working similar hours for a weekly wage of from 30s. to 35s.; that the huge profits made by distributive firms showed that the industry can afford to pay decent wages; and that if

Co-operative Societies can carry on successfully with reasonable hours and a living wage, there is no reason why the whole of the trade should not do the same.

The result of the debate was a promise by the Government spokesman that the whole matter will be considered with a view to improving the enforcement of the present laws. The motion was agreed to without a division.

Better Pensions.

Labour's Pension Plan was put before the House on December 1, when Labour moved that "immediate measures should be taken to establish a scheme of pensions on a scale which will facilitate and encourage elderly workers to retire from industry, and to remove certain anomalies in the operation of the existing law."

The Plan provides for better pensions at 65 for a man and 55 for a wife. A man would get £1 a week and a married couple £1 15s. An unemployed person 60 years of age and unlikely to regain employment would also get the pension of £1 a week. The scheme also provides better pensions for widows and orphans by raising the amounts to 10s. a week for the first child, 7s. 6d. for the second, and 5s. for each subsequent child.

The total annual cost would be £85,000,000. The **maximum** extra weekly contribution from the workers would be 1s. for men and 9d. for women. Employers would pay a maximum of 1s. a week for each worker, male or female. These amounts would be reduced by any contribution made by the State. A Labour Government would ensure that a State contribution is made. If the State contributed, say, £25,000,000 a year, it would make the workers' contribution about 8d. a week for men and 6d. for women.

Labour M.P.s urged that workers who have given lives of service to industry are entitled to retire at 65 in decency and comparative comfort; and that the country could well afford to embark on the scheme. But all such pleas fell on deaf ears. The Labour motion was opposed by the Government on the alleged ground that the scheme would place too heavy a burden on industry and the Exchequer.

The speeches in opposition to the scheme clearly indicate that the "National" Government does not propose to do anything to improve the condition of old people who are existing in acute poverty owing to the inadequacy of the present pensions.

Hospital Workers' Long Hours.

The long hours worked by hospital employees is a national scandal. On December 4 the Labour Party made a big effort to remedy this

state of affairs by moving the second reading of a Bill to limit the working hours of nurses and other workers in hospitals and institutions controlled by Local Authorities to 48 a week or 96 a fortnight.

During the debate it was pointed out that unless this matter is dealt with the present acute shortage of nurses will continue. Instances were quoted of hospital staffs working from 70 to 80 hours a week and having irksome conditions imposed on them in reference to permits for being out of the institution after 10 p.m. It was also proved that where the 48-hour week has been put into operation it has worked smoothly.

The Government opposed the Bill and made a feeble attempt to justify its opposition by referring to the Inter-Departmental Committee Inquiry which is investigating conditions in the nursing service. In spite of the fact that the Labour Bill had the support of the Nurses Advisory Council, the Guild of Nurses and the great majority of the workers concerned, the second reading was defeated by 11 votes.

Hire-Purchase Injustices.

A notable success was achieved on December 10, when Labour's Hire-Purchase Bill was given a second reading without opposition. It applies to hire-purchase agreements for one article up to £50 and in other cases up to £100. Its purpose is to protect workers' families from the sharp practices of some of the less reputable firms. The main provisions of the Bill were :

All goods offered for hire purchase and every agreement must have a declaration of the price at which the goods can be bought for cash ; every agreement under £20 must be signed by the hirer personally ; where the hire-purchase price does not exceed £50 the hirer shall be able to return the goods after one-third of the price has been paid, and in other cases one-half ; if an owner or his agent enters a dwelling for the re-possession the agreement shall be void ; in case of default after one-third of the price has been paid, the owner shall not seize the goods without first serving a notice on the hirer who may, within seven days, apply to the County Court for relief.

The Bill also provides that hire-purchase goods shall have the same full sales guarantee that goods are given under the Sale of Goods Act. It also protects the guarantor on the same terms as the hirer.

In short, it will end the scandal of poor people having goods "snatched back" after a great proportion of the selling price has been paid.

Being a private member's Bill, its fate may depend upon whether the Government will give additional time for its last stages.

Miners and the Coal Bill.

All the matters dealt with so far were raised on the initiative of the Labour Party on private members' days. We now turn to the activities of the Party in connection with measures introduced by the Government. The new Coal Bill provides a typical instance of how Labour regards every Government proposal from the point of view of its effect on the workers and the national well-being.

This Bill, which was given a second reading on November 23, is a long and complicated measure, the main provisions being the acquisition of coal royalties by the State, and the compulsory reorganisation of the coal industry by amalgamations and other steps. A Coal Commission is to take over the ownership of all coal from July 1, 1942, and the royalty owners (estimated to number 4,300) are to receive £66,450,000 as compensation. Labour's general criticism of the Bill was contained in the following amendment to the second reading :

"That this House, recognising the importance of coal mining as a basic industry upon which the prosperity of the nation largely depends, is dissatisfied with the policy of amalgamating mining undertakings regardless of the effect upon the life of the local community, and being of the opinion that in the national interest, which includes the safety and well-being of mine-workers, it is essential that there should be unified control of the whole industry under public ownership, cannot assent to the second reading of a measure which, whilst conceding the principle of the public ownership of coal, leaves this national asset to be exploited by private interests for their own gain."

The committee stage of the Bill is being taken in the House while this pamphlet is going to press, and the Labour Party is putting up a big fight to secure something tangible for the miners and to make the measure more effective in the national interest. Already a series of Labour amendments has been moved for this purpose.

One of the principal amendments sought to extend the powers of the Coal Commission to include the business of coal mining and the treatment of coal. The case for this amendment is that the Bill empowers the Commission to bore and search for coal, but if coal is found it has to be handed over to private interests to work. If nobody will work it, presumably the coal will be left in the ground.

Another Labour amendment attempted to secure that in the directions to the Commission the words "interests, efficiency, and better organisation of the coal mining industry" shall include the wage standards of the workers and the full utilisation of all existing social facilities and works such as transport, roads, schools, housing, places of entertainment, lighting, water supply, etc.

Labour also moved amendments to provide that three-quarters of any surplus funds that the Coal Commission may have after meeting the annual charges for acquiring the royalties should be used to establish a pensions fund for miners over 55 years of age, to improve miners' conditions (with special regard to safety measures) and to make provision for displaced miners.

All these amendments were opposed by the Government and defeated.

A Labour M.P. summed up the Government's outlook in a sentence :

"It is typical of the attitude of this Government, which is entirely controlled by private interests, that it should bring in a Bill for the general reorganisation of the coal mining industry, and yet refuse to give the body in control of that reorganisation any power to deal with the conditions and wages of miners."

Miners feel very strongly that the £66,450,000 to be given to the royalty owners is too much. The arbitration tribunal which gave this award held that the royalty owners were entitled to 15 years' purchase. But the royalties are not to be acquired until 1942, and the owners are to continue to receive their royalties in the meantime ; so they will, in effect, be getting nearly 20 years' purchase.

The Labour Party moved to reduce the amount of compensation to £44,300,000, equal to 10 years' purchase, which would be a fair price in view of the above facts. But the Government rejected this proposal. During the debate Labour M.P.s pointed out that the compensation will be at the expense of the miners. It is estimated that the amount already paid in royalties would be sufficient to provide every miner's family with a house of the freehold value of £500 !

Another matter raised by Labour was the serious damage caused by subsidence in mining areas. An amendment was moved to make the Coal Commission liable for damage caused to a dwelling house or to the property of Local Authorities. In many cases Local Authorities and working class owners of houses have to bear considerable loss owing to such damage. The Minister of Mines admitted that there were cases of this kind, but he opposed the amendment, which was defeated. An earlier Labour amendment to ensure that the Commission shall have power to deal with the prevention of subsidences was withdrawn on an undertaking being given that the Minister would consider the matter with a view to including this provision in the Bill.

The Distressed Areas.

The Government's failure to take effective action to remedy the plight of the Distressed Areas has been indicted on every possible

occasion by the Labour Party. On December 16 the Party moved a vote of censure on the Government and pleaded for more fundamental measures to enable the people in these areas to take their proper place in the economic life of the country. Speech after speech from the Labour benches gave the House first-hand descriptions of the appalling state of affairs in which hundreds of thousands of workers and their families exist, owing to the Government's neglect of this urgent problem.

The Minister of Labour defended the Government in his usual blustering style, but there was not even a hint of a bold plan for dealing with the situation. The Leader of the Opposition made an effective reply in the course of which he stressed the vital importance of planning the industry of the nation in the best interests of the nation, and told the Government that when the armaments race ends we shall be left with new derelict areas up and down the country.

Unemployment Insurance.

The new Unemployment Insurance Bill, which was given a second reading on December 2, provides yet another instance of the Government's failure to tackle big problems in a big way. The Bill empowers Education Authorities to supply free meals to unemployed young people attending juvenile instruction centres (**a step which Labour had for a long time urged upon the Government**), brings persons employed in domestic service as gamekeepers, grooms, or stablemen into the agricultural scheme of unemployment insurance, and amends the financial arrangements in connection with the Unemployment Fund so as to enable the debt on the Fund to be paid off in larger amounts in order to reduce the annual interest charge.

The Labour Party moved an amendment to the second reading which welcomed the belated recognition that many unemployed juveniles are suffering from lack of food, but deplored the fact that the Bill ignores the recommendation of the Statutory Committee for the inclusion of non-manual workers, and leaves upon a section of the community a national burden incurred in time of depression instead of devoting the surplus in the Fund to raising the standard of life of the unemployed.

Labour speakers made out an overwhelming case for the inclusion of "black-coated" workers earning up to £400 a year. They also urged that the surplus in the Fund (over £62,000,000 at the end of 1937) which has been obtained by imposing the Means Test on the unemployed and by throwing hundreds of thousands on to the Unemployment Assistance Board, should be used to improve benefits and abolish the three days' waiting period, and not for the repaying of a debt which ought never to have been put on to the Fund.

The People's Party.

This brief sketch of the Labour Party at work in Parliament covers only a part of the Party's activities. Many pages could be written on the Foreign Affairs debates in which Labour's spokesmen have pleaded for a courageous lead by Great Britain to make the League of Nations an effective instrument for international co-operation and a collective peace system. Labour has also made strenuous efforts to restore to the Spanish Government its legitimate right to buy arms for its defence against Franco and his Fascist allies.

Nor has it been possible to deal with the questions put to responsible Ministers day by day asking for the redress of grievances and injustices. Ex-Service men's pensions, seamen's and fishermen's conditions, bad housing, high rents—these and many other matters of vital concern to the workers and their families have been raised either at question-time or by motions.

But enough has been written to show that the Labour Party is the only Party that fights all the time for the right of the workers to a decent standard of living, and for Socialism and Peace which alone can bring real prosperity to the whole of the people.

The moral is obvious :

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